



## **APRIL 2, 1957: DALLAS' DATE WITH DISASTER**

**by Chip Mahaney**

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We Texans pride ourselves on "bigness", often to the derision of the rest of the country. We even take pride in our most-feared natural calamity -- the tornado. Ours are bigger and badder than those the rest of "y'all" experience, or so we like to tell ourselves. Still, some of the numbers back up our claim. One of the deadliest single tornadoes on record killed 114 people as it plowed through downtown Waco in 1953. One of the worst damage-doers of all time roared through Wichita Falls in 1979. Indeed, almost every major city in the northern half of Texas has, at some point in our recorded history, felt the fury from nature's most intense breed of storm. Consider Lubbock (1970), San Angelo (1953), Paris (1982), or Amarillo (1949) -- they've all been there.



But for reasons known only to God, the sprawling cities of Dallas and Fort Worth have largely escaped the wrath of killer tornadoes. Many of the Metroplex's suburbs (Lancaster and DeSoto are recent examples) have been hit, and hit hard, over the years. But the two biggest cities in north Texas still wait for the day they'll be the target of a deadly, damaging tornado. There's one storm, however, that Dallas remembers with great clarity -- not because it was the biggest (it likely would have rated a strong F3 on today's Fujita scale), or the baddest (10 dead, 200 injured, \$4 million in damage). Rather, Dallasites remember the April 2, 1957, tornado, simply because just about everyone saw it. And for those who weren't around to see it in person, there's thousands of photographs, and hours of film, that have preserved almost the entire life cycle of the tornado.

Forty years after the Great Tornado of 1957 blazed a path through parts of south and west Dallas, the twister remains one of the best chronicled ever. The clear skies behind the funnel made for easy viewing, even from many miles away. And because it passed just a couple miles west of downtown just before the end of the work day, thousands of business and factory workers saw a show they would never forget. The tornado started south, went north, and even bent a little to the west near the end of its 45-minute life -- it was not your textbook twister in this regard. The damage trail started in Dallas' far southern reaches, close to where interstate 20 crosses west-to-east through south Dallas County today. For the first 10 minutes of its life, the vortex was barely visible. Only a small funnel and a corresponding debris cloud on the ground gave notice that a tornado had formed from the heavy thunderstorm that seemingly ended almost 20 minutes before.

If you drive up Polk Street in south Dallas today, you'll see nary a trace of the tornado that traveled along this road 40 years ago. Damage here was spotty -- a few roofs blown off some minor structure damage, broken windows and tree limbs. As the tornado traveled north, no doubt it gave downtowners a scare. Just a scant twist to the right would have put it on a collision course with the center of the city. Instead, for those watching from skyscrapers only two or three miles away, the glass that separated them from the elements outdoors doubled as a theater screen serving up a Tuesday afternoon matinee. Dallas radio stations gave "live", moment-by-moment descriptions of the twister's doings and undoings. The tornado's slow trek allowed time for even large cameras to be pulled out from the nearby TV stations' studios and on to their respective rooftops.

Not until the tornado was 13 minutes old did the vortex appear to reach all the way to the ground. By the time it passed Singleton Boulevard in West Dallas, it was leaving behind a continuous trail of debris. Lillie Fuller still lives on Vilbig Street, between Singleton Boulevard and the Trinity River. On April 2, 1957, she was a 31-year-old homemaker, and pregnant. She remembers a friend screaming at her door, "Tornado, Tornado". As she looked out the window she could see it coming her way up the street, tearing up houses and cars and trees. Everything. She grabbed her keys and ran for her car. She started the engine, and made it to the corner intersection in front of her house. But the car died, and she was stuck. She says she remembers thinking she was a "goner". But she does remember -- that is the good news. Lillie Fuller had a front-row seat for Dallas' worst-ever tornado. As she sat frozen in her car, the funnel blew her home apart as it passed, less than a 100 feet away from the intersection where she sat. She considers it a miracle she escaped unhurt. But others weren't so lucky. Three people died in Lillie's neighborhood.

Across the river, many of the homes along one block of Riverside Drive were never rebuilt after the 1957 tornado knocked them all down, one by one. Only a few overgrown driveways leading from the street remain as witnesses to that deadly day. Robert Curry was at work when the storm damaged part of his home and destroyed others nearby. He later found out that his wife's cousin who lived across the street suffered twice. Two of her children, who were home alone when the tornado

hit, had been thrown out of their house and on to the street, without any apparent scratch or bruise. But still they lay dead.

The tornado began to weaken ever so slightly as it crossed the Trinity River and headed toward the Love Field airport. The track began to veer a little west of due north, bringing a sigh of relief to Parkland Hospital, which only days before had practiced for a disaster. In the hours and days that followed, Parkland's doctors and nurses would care for nearly all the 200 wounded and dead. The end of the tornado's 15-mile, 34-minute trail of terror came just north of Bachman Lake, which stands guard across the north end of Love Field. In the twister's final moments as a small spindly rope, it still packed enough punch to damage a few final homes. A Dallas policeman traveling down Harry Hines Boulevard said, however, he drove through the tornado there and didn't suffer any damage.

The final totals: 10 dead, more than 200 injured, more than \$4 million in damage to homes, churches, and businesses. But this tornado's greatest may be these: hundreds of photographs, hours of moving pictures, thousands upon thousands of eyewitness accounts -- all left behind by the killer storm. Dallas TV station WFAA-TV produced a 30-minute documentary, "Disaster Dallas", which aired perhaps a week after the tornado. And the Weather Bureau itself, led by Robert G. Beebe, published a lengthy study of the storm -- complete with photographs, professional and amateur weather observations, weather maps. Perhaps no other tornado has ever been chronicled so well.

(Author's note: Both the documentary film and the Weather Bureau's report are available for viewing at the Dallas library's downtown headquarters. Storm enthusiasts will enjoy a close reading of the written report, in particular, as it lends great light on the prevailing wisdom and knowledge of tornadoes at that time. )

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